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Old and New Oppositions in Contemporary Europe

Unity and peace in Europe, freedom and democracy in Eastern Europe: *Government and Opposition*'s founding editor Ghiţă Ionescu – the centenary of whose birth this special issue commemorates – might have been contented to see that two of his main ideals have now by and large been realized. At the same time, in contemporary Europe we can observe a huge variety of forms of opposition to the conventional holders of power, who appear to have been unable to respond successfully to new and pressing societal and economic challenges. The old convictions that once characterized politics in the European liberal democracies are gradually eroding, while the volatile and fragmented polities of the new post-communist democracies in the East are only adding to the increased uncertainties. The ongoing financial and economic crises have exacerbated many of the existing tensions, between new and old generations, between groups with levels of educational attainment, and between the domestic and supra-national levels. European democracies in the twenty-first century are thus having to contend with various challenges that are aimed, directly or indirectly, at the core of the political system, including the populist disregard for some of the fundamental values of liberal democracy and the rule of law, the variety of anti-establishment parties and movements challenging the democratic legitimacy of a discredited financial and political class, and the unclear outcomes of further European integration. Taken together, the contributions to this special issue suggest, these developments may cast a different light on our empirical and normative understanding of the European models of liberal democracy and the welfare state

SETTING THE SCENE

THE FOREWORD TO THE FIRST ISSUE OF *GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION* highlighted three reasons for the launching of the new journal, a prescient joint venture by three founding editors: Ghiţă Ionescu, the centenary of whose birth this special issue commemorates, Isabel de Madariaga and Leonard Schapiro. First, opposition should not be

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reduced in its meaning to a notion of hostility to the governing establishment, but rather construed more broadly as encompassing the variety of challenges that could be observed to the prevailing authorities. No coincidence at all that the editors had deep interests in political change across history and in the manifestation of opposition as a form of embryonic pluralism in the then Soviet imperium in Central and Eastern Europe. Second, the notion that there might be a stable Utopian resting point that countries might reach was unsound. Of course, this view was partly anchored in a critique of Marxist logic, but an implication that can be drawn is that we should not assume that Western democracies would necessarily reach a stable and calm model of democratic practice. Third, just as it was erroneous for historians to write their accounts as if history belonged to the victors, so it would be erroneous to analyse the contemporary as if politics belonged to the winners in the race for political power. These observations rooted an ecumenical approach to the study of politics which needed to draw on insights from across disciplines, insights from practitioners as well as scholars, and insights from across the range of political spaces, both transnational and transcontinental.

This reasoning holds up robustly in contemporary circumstances. At least in Europe (but not only in Europe) we are living in a period in which we can observe a huge variety of forms of opposition to the conventional holders of power. A variety of political movements jostle with the 'mainstream' political parties, and patterns of political recruitment are bringing into the political process participants with hugely varied backgrounds and ambitions. Some of the contestation that we observe is systemic, and a good number of challenges can be observed to the notion that there is a settled consensus around the main coordinates of politics. Hence it falls to us to look at the undercurrents of contestation and opposition, and not only at the performance of government/s, if we are to understand where the scope lies for achieving practical outcomes for the citizen – and for the wider political community. This collection of articles focuses mainly on the opposition side of the phenomenon. Ghiţă Ionescu might have reflected that it deserves a companion volume to examine whether and how far it is the case that the burgeoning of so many forms of opposition reflects a failure on the part of governments to respond skilfully to new societal and economic challenges.

At least in Europe – but for our purposes especially in Europe – these issues have particular cogency. Ghiţă Ionescu had a deep interest in the process of European integration (see, for example, the essays in Parry 1994). *Government and Opposition* was in its early years one of the few academic journals (alongside the similarly pioneering *Journal of Common Market Studies*) to devote space to contributions on the European dimension to 'in-country' politics and the emergence of a transversal European political process as such. This may seem strange to readers who have entered this field much more recently, when there has been a proliferation of journals focused on European integration and a proliferation of different schools of analysis competing for intellectual leadership. However, in the 1960s and 1970s it was hard for specialists in this field to find outlets for their research findings and for them to be recognized as making significant contributions to what were then the mainstream social science disciplines.

In terms of the sociology of knowledge, or at least the practices of current research communities, much has changed. These days the intertwining of European and domestic politics is understood as a much more commonplace phenomenon. Indeed, as the contributions to this special issue suggest, nowadays it would be positively misleading to study the day-to-day politics of individual European countries without taking into account the intrusions of the transversal European dimension. Similarly, it makes little sense to make judgements on the vicissitudes of European integration without exploring the domestic dimension of politics within individual European countries. In those earlier years, simply to be informed about the 'facts' of European integration was difficult – and here *Government and Opposition* made an enormous contribution by publishing informed accounts of emerging practices in the European Community, now European Union (EU). The small size of the academic community at the time was such that the authors were often practitioners with a taste for writing for wider audiences – and indeed one of the features of the period was the emergence of a circle of practitioners and scholars who welcomed opportunities to engage in shared debates about their infant phenomenon. Nowadays the flow of information about the practice of the EU is overwhelming and the challenge instead is to find productive ways of filtering, sifting and sorting the information that is relevant to and cogent for this or that nuanced analysis. And today there is a

healthy competition among different approaches and methodologies. The proliferation of new research tools, both qualitative and quantitative, brings different insights to our topic. Yet these also have to stand up to scrutiny from those scholars who insist, as Ghiţă Ionescu would have done, on the enduring value of normative analysis.

PATTERNS OF OPPOSITION

Throughout most of the twentieth century, the older ideologies derived from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries continued to oppose one another, on both the intra- and the interstate levels. Thus, on the one hand, democracy was faced with, threatened by, and indeed occasionally gave way to, a variety of non-democratic alternatives, including fascism, Nazism and communism, with the 'really existing socialist' regimes in the Soviet bloc continuing to persist as an apparently vigorous alternative to democracy until nearly the end of the millennium. On the other hand, these opposing ideologies had been internalized within the polities of many of the democratic Europe states, such that they manifested themselves as anti-system parties on the extremes – both left and right – of the political spectrum. While the end of the grand old ideologies was perhaps somewhat prematurely announced in the late 1950s (Bell 1960), it was the demise of communism in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s that constituted the real watershed event. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, few existing alternatives remained to democratic capitalism, at least on the European continent. This not only implied an end to the geopolitical constellation of the Cold War that had divided Europe for roughly four decades, but also affected the internal dynamics within Europe's democratic polities, as the triumph of the liberal democratic form of government brought about a more 'normal' pattern of opposition across the continent.

As Robert Dahl (1966: xviii) reminds us, however, while today we are 'inclined to regard the existence of an opposition party as very nearly the most distinctive characteristic of democracy itself; and we take the absence of an opposition party as evidence . . . for the absence of democracy', the phenomenon of political opposition, in the form of political systems managing the major political conflicts of a society by allowing one or more organized opposition parties to

compete with the governing parties for votes and policies in elections and in parliament, is in fact a very modern development. Stable institutions providing legal, orderly and peaceful modes of political opposition have been rare throughout recorded history. And yet, the right of an organized opposition to challenge the prevailing authorities can be considered one of the great milestones in the development of democratic institutions (Dahl 1966: xiii). In this sense, Dahl's views echo those of his contemporary, Stein Rokkan (1970), who underscored the importance of the formal acknowledgement of the rights of the opposition to protest, to participate, to be represented and to acquire government office in what he identified as the four crucial stages – of legitimacy, incorporation, representation and executive power – in the development towards the establishment of universal and equal democracy.

The nature of conflict and the patterns of interaction between government and the various forms of opposition vary between countries and over time, of course, with the evidence suggesting a recent surge in intensity and an increase in the levels of polarization. In Germany, for example, the 'vanishing opposition' portrayed by Kirchheimer (1966) has given way to a much more intensified pattern of opposition since the late 1990s. In Belgium, the rift between the French-speaking and Flemish-speaking communities has further deepened, with the recent coalition, sworn in after 541 days of negotiations, holding the record for the longest time taken to form a government following an election. In the US, following what Dahl (1966) suggested was a recurrent generational pattern, the conflict appears to have reached new heights with the Tea Party and the Occupy movements creating identities that structure and polarize political attitudes above and beyond the impact of partisanship and ideology (for example, Greene and Saunders 2012). In addition, contemporary democratic polities are currently experiencing a variety of new forms of opposition to the established political elites, presenting themselves both outside and inside the arenas of democratic representation. Not only have populist parties, on both the right and left of the political spectrum, mushroomed across the European continent, but also other varieties of anti-establishment parties (think of the German Pirate Party, which since 2011 has succeeded in entering four *Land* parliaments, for example, or the Italian comedian and actor-turned-political activist Beppe Grillo, whose Five Star Movement managed to conquer

the city of Parma in a recent mayoral elections and to win the largest share of the vote in the Sicilian regional elections, as well as coming in third with about a quarter of the vote in the Italian general election as this article went to press) have managed to break into the conventional institutional structures. Undoubtedly an important catalyst for the intensification of opposition in the current climate is the continuing financial crisis that has swept across the globe, coupled with a near-hopeless economic crisis in the eurozone, which has discredited and delegitimized most of the existing financial and political class and at the same time has brought the issue of European integration onto the domestic political agenda of many of the member states.

It is with all of these points in our minds that this special issue has been devised. At its core is a group of scholars currently working on some of those key issues that were always of central interest for *Government and Opposition* as a journal. Underlying the choice of topics is a determination to explore the changing patterns of opposition in contemporary European democracies, as well as the dynamics of the ways in which domestic politics and the process of European integration have an impact on each other.

CONTENTIOUS AND CONTRARY POLITICS

One feature of contemporary politics across much of Europe is that there seems to be increasing evidence of contention and of contrariness. A first and perhaps most striking piece of evidence for this is the outbreak of populism in so many countries. Until the 1990s and despite a few isolated examples – such as French *Poujadism* or the populism of Franz Joseph Strauss in Bavaria – populism in Europe did not present a significant political force (Zaslove 2008). Since then, however, populist parties have rapidly spread across the continent and presently constitute an important undercurrent in many European polities, if not a predominance in some, having surged to unprecedented heights in countries such as Switzerland and the Netherlands. In fact, the significance of the populist phenomenon, in terms of both party politics and political discourse, has become such that Mudde (2004) argues that we can speak of a populist Zeitgeist. Originally, European populism was considered to be essentially a phenomenon of the right, associated with parties of the radical and extreme right such as the Austrian

Freedom Party (FPÖ) or the French National Front (FN), or with tax protest parties such as the Danish and Norwegian Progress Parties. While earlier studies on populism (for example, Canovan 1981; Ionescu and Gellner 1969) had already emphasized that populism in Latin America and the US could be associated with both the left and the right, these insights remained long overlooked in the European context (Zaslove 2008). In more recent years, however, scholars have started to pay increasing attention to populist parties on the left (for example, the German Party of Democratic Socialism or the Dutch Socialist Party) and the centre-right (such as Forza Italia), as well as the impact of populism on the political style and rhetoric of the conventional and mainstream political parties, with Tony Blair's New Labour in the UK providing an oft-cited example (see, for example, Mair 2002; March and Mudde 2005).

At its core, populism broadly distinguishes between the 'pure people' and a 'corrupt elite'. As Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008: 3) argue, populism is an ideology that 'pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous 'others' who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity, and voice'. As populism exposes the limitations inherent to liberal democracies, it is frequently perceived as a threat to the very principles and foundations of liberal democracy: populism is often understood as 'a pathological form, pseudo- and post-democratic, produced by the corruption of democratic ideals' (Taguieff 1995: 43). Others, however, reject the normal–pathology distinction (for example, Mudde 2004), just as they differ over the question of whether we are dealing here with a transient or durable phenomenon. To the extent that contemporary populism can be seen to be rooted in a particular historical conjuncture – post-industrialization, globalization, the changing nature of the nation state, the transformation of political parties and party systems – the current opportunity structure, not least its economic stresses, appears conducive to a more permanent presence of populism in Western Europe. This is also true for the post-communist democracies of Central and Eastern Europe, albeit that populism there derives from a slightly different constellation involving the tensions and frustrations emanating from the combined effects of the transition to and consolidation of liberal democracy, the implementation of a market economy and apprehensions concerning European integration (Zaslove 2008: 321). If viewed as essentially

incompatible with liberal democracy, therefore, populism's presence may constitute a clear threat to the core foundations of modern democracy.

Populism thus takes many different forms, which need careful categorization. On the one hand, we can observe abrupt rises and falls of short-lived expressions of populism, the kind that decades ago used to be called 'flash parties', and the kind that seemed to be largely an expression of oppositional politics and time contingent. On the other hand, we can see populist movements and parties aspiring to and entering into government for shorter and longer periods of office. Moreover, this latter phenomenon has erupted not only in countries with longer traditions of contrary politics but also in countries historically thought of as among the more stable and conservative in their political practices: the Nordic region, the Netherlands and so forth. Is this development an indicator that populism is a sort of refreshing process in response to a kind of staleness in traditional politics? Or is it that populism is some type of new opposition to liberal democracy as such? And what is the governing capacity of those populist parties that have now acquired experience of political office?

A second issue about the rising contention is how far it is a consequence of the post-Cold War character of contemporary Europe. For several decades the binary ideological character of the Europe that was divided between East and West made a huge difference to the politics of individual countries. Of course that had its specificity for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, tied as they were to state socialism. However, the ideological confrontation also marked the politics of West European countries. We perhaps need to pay more attention to the ways in which West European politics has loosened up as the competition with the state socialist model has lost cogency.

A third issue relates to the political economy of Europe, notably in the period since 2008, which has been marked by the global financial crisis and its particular manifestation and impacts in Europe. This special issue does not include (as it might have done) specific contributions on the political economy as such. Yet it hovers in the background necessarily. One of the primary factors behind the breakdown of the state socialist model in Central and Eastern Europe was that it failed to deliver a well-functioning economic system or to yield economic well-being for citizens. One of the main

strengths of West European politics was supposed to be that it provided economic welfare on a predictable and sustainable basis, and to build on this foundation a collective sense of community and solidarity, as Ghiţă Ionescu hoped. Indeed, this strength has been the basis and rationale for the efforts to export West European political practice to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe as intimately linked to the process of establishing well-functioning market economies. Since 2008 this perhaps complacent assumption has looked a little thin – but how thin? Here again there is a critical question as to the timelines and the trajectories. Is it that we are just going through a testing period of contingent pressures and painful but temporary austerity? Or is it that there are more fundamental forces at work that throw into question our core understanding of the European model/s of liberal democracy and welfare state?

These tensions and stresses would have worried Ghiţă Ionescu, since he had such a clear sense of the connection between economic well-being and political civility. The recent period of economic crisis was preceded by the neoliberal turn in the European political economy that manifested itself first in Western Europe and then in Central and Eastern Europe. Perhaps the emergence of left-wing populism may in part be understood as a response to the acquiescence of centre-left parties in at least some countries with that neoliberal turn, then to be fuelled by distressed reactions to the impacts of the economic crisis and the raft of austerity policies. In a similar vein the spread of right-wing populism may be partly rooted in a kind of highly individualist populism that generates a trend towards self-centred rather than community-minded affiliation and voting. Indeed, the rapid individualization of Western societies may have facilitated a more general recourse to instrumental protest voting as an alternative to expressions of long-standing partisan identities or loyalties.

VOLATILE POLITICS

Across the continent we can observe a kind of volatility in political processes. The basis of party competition is changing, in Western Europe away from what used to be thought of as a standard paradigm, albeit with variations, while in Eastern Europe party systems carry markers of post-communist adaptations. Old cleavages

are making way for new voter alignments, and these new alignments seem to be built on shifting sands.

For a long time the political parties and party systems of European polities were underpinned by stable cleavages structures. Following the analysis of Lipset and Rokkan (1967) of the critical junctures that provided the sociopolitical basis of European party politics, which offered an influential theoretical and macro-historical explanation for the stability of European electoral behaviour in the immediate post-war period, it became customary to speak of the freezing of party systems. Since the 1970s and 1980s, however, European party systems have undergone a process of substantial dealignment and realignment from the traditional cleavage structures, as class divisions became less important and widespread secularization reduced the impact of religious divisions (for example, Dalton et al. 1984). The emergence of new left and green parties brought new and distinctive values to the political agenda, prioritizing 'post-materialist' issues such as environmental protection and the extension of democratic rights over traditional materialist values, which emphasize physical and economic security (Inglehart 1977). Because the older parties, usually of the left, have effectively absorbed many of the post-materialist issues, such as gender or the environment, the emergence of post-materialism has not implied the wholesale replacement of the old division between left and right by an alternative divide. The left as a whole has become more post-modern and more varied; there also has been a substantial amount of reshuffling on the right – most notably because of the decline in support for Christian Democratic parties and the rise of radical right-wing and populist parties. In terms of electoral support over time, however, the two blocs appear to be rather resilient (Gallagher et al. 2011).

While it is evident that the traditional cleavages have lost much of their original strength, this does not necessarily signify the end of the structuring of politics by social divisions. New (cultural) conflict dimensions may be emerging in Western democracies as a result of European integration and globalization, or, as Stubager (2013) argues in this special issue, as a result of changing patterns of education. Driven primarily by the parties of the new left and the populist right, this process is said to have contributed to the emergence of a new value-based cleavage, mobilizing and organizing voters along a protective-nationalist versus liberal-cosmopolitan

divide (see, for example, Kriesi et al. 2008). The impact of the erosion of the old cleavage structures and of the changing dimensions of party competition is difficult to underestimate, with contemporary party systems witnessing increasing levels of fragmentation and rising levels of electoral volatility. This not only alters traditional patterns of government formation, as is attested by the installation of coalition governments in countries typically governed by single-party cabinets (such as Greece and the UK), but also makes the process of government formation increasingly intricate and complex, and the resulting coalitions potentially more unstable. In the Netherlands, for example, where no government has served the full four-year term since 1998, the increasingly fragmented and polarized party system resulted in a short-lived experiment with a minority government supported by the populist right in 2010, which collapsed only 18 months after its investiture. The general trend towards individualization not only results in more volatile politics but also alters the patterns of representation, from bottom-up and *ex ante* delegation to a more top-down and *ex post* form of accountability (Andeweg 2003).

The emergence of a post-materialist cleavage between, on the one hand, a more liberal/libertarian strand of political opinion and, on the other hand, a more authoritarian strand is examined in this special issue. Stubager (2013) analyses the Danish case, looking at data from one of the most highly educated populations in Europe, and argues for the resilience of libertarian sentiments. From a different angle, Albertazzi and Mueller (2013) examine the authoritarian features and policies of right-wing populists in government. The questions that follow are how far the presence of this post-materialist cleavage has been the product of a period of relative economic affluence, and how it may evolve in tougher economic times. One possible evolution, of course, might be the re-emergence of the socioeconomic cleavage that underpinned the traditional left–right divide, but not necessarily in the same form as in earlier periods. There is, after all, some evidence of the neglect of the community–solidarity dimension by some traditional centre-left parties, as well as of the declining benevolent paternalism of some centre-right parties – and with considerable variation across countries.

One striking feature of this volatility is that often elections are inconclusive. There seems to be a trade-off between the instrumental and expressive functions of elections, played out in

the specificities of individual country contexts and for some at the sub-national level as well. Yet it may be that there is a potential weakening of the relevance of both functions. But then we also need to get the timelines clear in order to distinguish trends from temporary blips in the political processes. We should also note that very recently we have seen countries resorting to the recruitment of governments from outside the regular political process – those 'technocrats' in Greece and Italy.

How, then, can we most usefully analyse this political kaleidoscope? On the one hand, fine-grained micro-analysis of individual countries seems vital, each country as an 'N' of 1, and especially so if deep linguistic and cultural knowledge is needed to dig under the surface of political phenomena. On the other hand, systematic cross-country comparison should be a persistent objective to disentangle the different factors of volatility. Here we make a plea for the need to draw together insights from both qualitative and quantitative analysis in order to reach robust conclusions on the dynamics of change. As the founders of *Government and Opposition* insisted, it is also necessary to draw on insights from political history as well as from studies of the very contemporary in order to anchor our analyses.

COMPARATIVE POLITICS AND EAST–WEST CONVERGENCE

The geopolitical and ideological Cold War division in Europe used to generate quite different approaches and methods to the study of politics in Western and Eastern Europe. The notion that comparative politics could travel evenly across such systemically different kinds of polities was out of bounds, except to the extent that political phenomena in (Central and) Eastern Europe could be shown to be unlike the West European templates. Instead there was a binary division between those who specialized in Western Europe and those who studied Eastern Europe, accentuated by the necessity for scholars of Eastern Europe to understand the languages of individual countries in the region and by the fact that rather few scholars based in Eastern Europe were familiar with either the languages or the academic discourses of Western Europe – some exception here has to be made for sociology, where there was some importing of Western approaches into the study of Eastern Europe, notably in Poland. Ghiţă Ionescu was himself a striking exception in

exploring the politics of countries across the continent. Comparisons, of course, were commonplace and indeed increasingly *de rigueur* and increasingly systematic in the study of West European countries, helped by the growing availability of comparable data on the basis of which to explore similarities and differences. Such comparisons were increasingly tied to this or that overarching approach at the sub-field level – political parties, public opinion, executive-legislative behaviour and so forth. Most specialists on Western Europe paid little attention to developments in the East, which were often the subject of exotic specialized course modules. Some exception should be made here as regards the Soviet Union, which was quite often incorporated as a minor feature in core courses on comparative politics. Those of us involved in tutoring such courses had to acquire a superficial knowledge of Soviet state and party organization, but not much beyond that.

From 1989 onwards that changed dramatically. Specialists on Western Europe – economists predominantly, but also lawyers and political scientists – found themselves drawn into a good deal of advisory work as technical support was offered to Central and Eastern Europe on how to develop market economies and liberal democracies.[1] The messages were clear: Central and East European countries had to be good students of West European templates and practices. This was the anchor of advice at the cross-national level and it became the anchor of advice via the EU processes of support for transition, first through association partnerships and subsequently through the formal accession processes. The more like West Europeans they could become, the better the chances of stable transition and the better the chances of joining the EU as full members sooner rather than later. Former specialists on Eastern Europe began to engage with the West European debates by offering their specialized country expertise, with their deeper knowledge of the languages and cultures of individual countries. The research communities of the region began to retool and to import Western syllabuses and research methods into their university and research systems. Very importantly, many young scholars from the region travelled to Western Europe or to North America for their postgraduate training in Western social science.

How, then, does democratic politics in the post-communist democracies compare with those in the established democracies in Western Europe? First of all, it appears that the political parties in

the newer democracies are different. As they emerged from an institutional context that involved a wholesale restructuring of the democratic polity and the very creation of an inclusive system of political contestation, political parties in Central and Eastern Europe have followed a very different trajectory of party formation compared to their counterparts in Western Europe. In contrast to their counterparts in the older democracies, which gradually developed from cadre to mass parties, to catch-all parties and eventually to cartel parties, in many of the post-communist European polities, the parties originated in the state institutions and grew from there (van Biezen 2003).

Many of the newly created parties thus emerged as, and have essentially remained, top-down organizations, consisting primarily of a small group of national elites and having originated within parliament rather than having been built up in the society. In many cases, moreover, parties appeared for a long time more or less confined to a parliamentary – and sometimes a governmental – existence and lacked an established organizational structure extending much beyond these offices. As a consequence, the party organizations on the ground in post-communist Europe tend to be weakly developed. Most parties have built only rudimentary organizational networks in the local constituencies and the level of party membership tends to be marginal, with the ratio usually falling below the levels recorded for contemporary West European democracies (see van Biezen et al. 2012).

Democratic party politics in post-communist Europe furthermore emerged in a period in which parties could avail themselves of the modern mass means of communication as well as the sometimes generous provision of state subventions. This has decisively strengthened their linkage with the state while at the same time encouraging high levels of personalization, thus reinforcing the organizational styles already encouraged by the context of a newly democratizing polity by removing key incentives to establish more structural partisan rather than loose and temporal electoral linkages with society. In post-communist Europe, moreover, the linkage between society and parties tends to be much weaker because it was not normally social divisions that lay at the foundation of the newly emerging parties. Rather than politicized social stratification, party formation was often based on politicized attitudinal differences, in particular regarding the desirability, degree and direction of regime

change (see also Tóka 1998). Assisted by a pronounced lack of social stratification after decades of communism, parties often lack natural constituencies in society. This makes post-communist electorates substantially more open and more available than those of the established democracies. As a consequence, they are also more volatile and uncertain. While social and attitudinal divisions or ascriptive identities may well become the source of political conflict, the fluidity of the social structure and the relative lack of crystallization of identities suggest that such foundations are unlikely to constitute a stable pattern of alignments for some time to come – if at all (Mair 1997: 182).

Because parties were not normally created as the representative agents of a predefined segment of society, they are also generally much less firmly rooted in civil society than the mass integration parties of the early twentieth century, and the linkages with society tend to be weaker and less durable. This can be seen not only from the generally low numbers of party members but also from the generally weaker levels of party identification and the higher levels of electoral abstention and electoral volatility (Gallagher et al. 2011: 306–11). Weakly developed party loyalties, high levels of intraparty conflict and instability, and a general lack of party institutionalization are all more or less inevitable by-products of the volatile context of a new democracy. As the cleavage structures underpinning the party systems are weakly developed, the party systems are less likely to exhibit the same bias towards stabilization as in the established European democracies (Mair 1997: 175–98). Overall, parties in Central and Eastern Europe have developed more successfully, and consolidated more rapidly, as institutional rather than social actors. They have leapfrogged earlier evolutionary stages of party development (cf. Smith 1993). Weakly anchored within society and weakly institutionalized as intermediaries between civil society and the state, political parties are unlikely to play a role similar to the mass party in Western Europe in the structural consolidation of the party systems. As such they resemble the increasingly weakly anchored parties and volatile party systems that have now also begun to characterize the West.

Over recent years it has thus become 'normal' for comparative politics to range across the variety of countries in Europe and on the boundaries of Europe. Similar core questions and core methodologies now lie at the centre of academic analysis, whichever country is being

studied, and there has been a flowering of expertise on the 'new' democracies (and some not yet democracies) in Central and Eastern Europe. Within the region sophisticated research communities are emerging and becoming internationally connected, and a great many scholars from the region work in West European and North American universities. Here, then lie some interesting questions. Are the political processes that we observe in Central and Eastern Europe converging on the earlier West European template? How are the politics of Western Europe changing as the continent changes, at the country level or at the transnational level? Just to take a couple of points from recent history, the wars in Yugoslavia and the new patterns of transnational migration are affecting domestic and transnational politics in Europe in different ways. Are there newly emerging trends in politics across the continent? In short, have post-communist politics led to convergence or divergence between East and West? And is 'post-communism' still the relevant question or is it now being displaced by other factors of political, societal and economic change?

EUROPE NO LONGER BELONGS TO THE EUROPHILES

The relationship between the European integration process and the domestic politics of individual countries seems to be changing fundamentally. It is not that it is new for there to be forms of opposition to European integration in this or that country. Politics across Western Europe has been marked by sometimes fierce debates about the merits of European integration and of one or another proposition for deepening integration. However, in most West European countries – the UK may be an exception here – the opposition to 'Europe' was largely episodic. For the most part the political class of those involved intimately in making the EU work were able to demonstrate a positive link to the value of European collaboration for maintaining peace, for achieving prosperity and for anchoring their countries' places in the wider European family. It was some combination of these factors that helped to embed in the European transnational framework both South European countries emerging from authoritarianism and Central and East European countries emerging from communism.

None of this is so clear any more, partly because the geopolitical context has changed radically, partly because the prosperity bonus

has waned and partly because there is an increasing tension between globalization and Europeanization on the one hand and the pull of local and parochial politics on the other. In addition, there is an intergenerational conundrum in that the values that used to be cogent and which used to attract a 'permissive consensus' in support of European integration carry much less appeal to younger citizens. In the meantime, processes of change within the EU have failed to resolve the democratic deficit and there have been fumbling efforts to generate convincing remedies. The eurozone crisis still upon us has not helped to make the case for European integration more persuasive. Hence Euroscepticism in its various manifestations has become more infectious and more vocal in more countries.

The outcome is that the European issue has become more present and more contentious in rather a lot of countries. Domestic politics now sets more of the parameters of what is achievable through the EU: in countries that are more obviously among the winners from integration (not least Germany and the Netherlands) as well as in those where the balance sheet is less clear. Moreover, there is accumulating evidence that the divisions of opinion also fall across the political and economic spectrum within countries. It seems that we shall have to become accustomed to examining the interplay between contention about Europe with domestic political challenges to traditional patterns of politics.

SO WHAT IS NEW? AND WHAT FOLLOWS?

The contributions in this special issue address several of these themes, assessing the prevailing patterns of political competition and opposition in contemporary Europe as well as their transformation over time from several different empirical and theoretical perspectives. Traversing key issues and questions emanating from recent scholarly debates, they offer a critical and stimulating evaluation of the state of opposition in modern democracies.

As European democracies are displaying increasingly higher levels of electoral volatility, Robin Best (2013) observes how the number of parties receiving votes in elections as well as the number of parties within the legislature has steadily increased during the post-war era. She examines the consequences of this increased party system fragmentation for oppositions and their respective governments,

focusing on 18 of the established Western democracies. Best observes that voters are choosing to behave in a more expressive rather than in a strategic manner and that the effects of electoral systems on electoral behaviour appear to have weakened. As a result, the growth in electoral fragmentation is changing the shape of political opposition by keeping higher proportions of parties outside the legislature. In addition, the fragmentation that does get translated into legislative representation manifests itself more readily as fragmentation among opposition – rather than governing – political parties. This suggests that governments are less representative of the changes occurring in the electoral realm than their respective oppositions. As the composition of governments is not keeping up with the increased diversity of electoral preferences, governmental majorities may become smaller and more tenuous. Moreover, as countries have moved towards less cohesive and more fragmented oppositional structures, they may face difficulties when holding governments accountable for their actions in office. Best's findings thus suggest that increased fragmentation may pose challenges for the representational functions of governments and oppositions in established democracies. While dissatisfaction with the current government may drive support for extra-parliamentary parties, this growth in support may further fuel citizen discontent. Unless major parties manage to recapture the support lost to these alternative parties, it is a trend unlikely to abate. From this perspective, the levels of citizen discontent generated by recent political events, such as the lingering effects of the financial and eurozone crises, do not bode well for the future for the major political parties.

Daniele Albertazzi and Sean Mueller (2013) in their contribution examine the question of whether, and to what extent, populism is compatible with the basic tenets of liberal democracy. Now that populist parties have established themselves firmly in the majority of European party systems, and have positioned themselves in some countries among the largest parties, they arguably constitute a durable phenomenon in European politics (and beyond). What is more, in an increasing number of countries, populist parties have now acquired government responsibility, while in several others they have provided the support for minority governments. Although populist government participation is still relatively rare, the trend is clearly upwards (Mudde 2012). For this reason, while much of the literature tends to concentrate on the question of what populist

parties claim when they are in opposition, the focus of Albertazzi and Mueller is instead on what populist parties actually do when they are in government. They analyse a number of populist parties in power, in both established democracies in Western Europe and more recently created ones in the post-communist East, and demonstrate that populist parties, once in power, continue to advance policies that clash with some of the fundamental tenets of liberal democracy.

Most notably, Albertazzi and Mueller (2013) point out, populist parties do not subscribe to the principle of the division of powers or to the notion that in a democracy the power of the majority should be constrained. In addition, the parties appear to have few reservations about sacrificing individual rights, in particular for members of religious or ethnic minority groups. Although populism is well embedded in the rules and procedures of electoral democracy, populist parties pose a clear challenge to the principles of liberal democracy and the rule of law, which has become most apparent in the parties' policies aiming to curtail the powers of the judiciary, the rights of minorities, as well as individual freedom of expression. As the opportunity structures of mobilization that have enabled the expansion of populist parties – including the retrenchment of welfare states, the eroding legitimacy of conventional party politics and the changing nature of state sovereignty – are likely to persist in the foreseeable future, the populist phenomenon is here to stay for some time to come (Zaslove 2008). Ultimately, Albertazzi and Mueller contend, populism constitutes a challenge to the liberal consensus that has provided one of the fundamental foundations of the European democratic project, at both the national and supra-national levels.

From a different perspective, Rune Stubager's contribution (2013) assesses the challenges to conventional modes of political representation by examining the changing socio-structural basis of contemporary party politics. Although the historical cleavages have lost a considerable part of their relevance and class and religious voting are clearly on the decline, this does not imply that social background and identity have become entirely irrelevant to electoral politics. In this context, Stubager analyses the rising electoral importance of issues on the authoritarian–libertarian dimension, suggesting that education – and particularly the social identity and consciousness associated with it – may constitute an important new

social anchor for electoral behaviour on this divide. Drawing on the Danish experience, his analysis shows that voter groups with different educational backgrounds have developed distinct identities and group consciousness and are influenced by these factors when voting for parties that mobilize their side of the conflict. In that sense, what seems to be underpinning the authoritarian–libertarian conflict is an educational divide with a clear empirical, normative and behavioural component that may have the potential to structure electoral politics like a traditional cleavage (see Bartolini and Mair 1990: 213). Socio-structural factors thus continue to play an important role for electoral behaviour as modern party politics continues to be embedded in social structures and attitudinal orientations. These provide the basis for group-specific appeals and political behaviour (see Enyedi 2008), although it remains questionable whether they can have the same stabilizing potential as the historical class and denominational cleavages. A further question for future analysis in this regard relates to the potential of this authoritarian–libertarian cleavage to persist in the face of reinvigorated contestation over socio-economic issues.

Fernando Casal Bértoa's article (2013) examines the degree to which European party systems in the West and the East have developed since the collapse of communism. He concentrates on the three major areas of partisan competition: the parliamentary, governmental and electoral arenas. First of all, East European party systems tend to display higher levels of fragmentation, although it is also possible to observe a tendency towards legislative concentration (Bulgaria and Lithuania being the only exceptions). Higher degrees of fragmentation, however, do not necessary imply higher levels of polarization. As the anti-democratic alternatives on the extremes of the political spectrum have largely dissipated, a statistical correlation between party system fragmentation and polarization can no longer be found, either in the West or the East (where the relationship is in fact the reverse). In addition, the structure of partisan competition in West European democracies has remained somewhat closed, except in some countries such as Italy and the Netherlands. This can be seen from the limited access to government for new parties, the prevalence of familiar government formulae and a tendency for alternation in government to be wholesale rather than partial. The structure of interparty competition in Eastern Europe, on the other hand, remains entirely open (with the possible exception of Hungary),

as is evidenced by generally partial alterations in the composition of government, the pervasiveness of innovative coalition formula and the open access to government power. Finally, a comparison of the levels of electoral volatility reveals that West European voters are much more loyal partisans than their counterparts in the East, where voter fluidity is on average more than twice as high as in the established democracies. This is a corollary of, among other things, the high degree of party system fragmentation and the low levels of party continuity. In sum, and although two decades have passed since the advent of democracy in the post-communist East, party politics in Eastern Europe continues to be characterized by higher levels of instability and unpredictability in all areas. In a globalized world where the old and new mass media have replaced mass organizations as intermediaries between electorates and their representatives and partisan linkages are based on temporary individualistic preferences rather than well-entrenched in socio-political cleavages, systemic instability may well continue to constitute the norm also in the longer run. Indeed, it may well be that in the future West will meet East. As parties and party systems in old and new democracies can be seen to converge, it appears that the West European polities are developing towards the standard currently set by the new post-communist democracies, rather than the other way around (van Biezen 2003: 220).

Finally, Catherine de Vries (2013) in her contribution focuses on the patterns of support for European integration. On the one hand, there appears to be a relatively widespread recognition that Euroscepticism has become more significant in recent decades, with the 'permissive consensus' that characterized popular attitudes towards European integration having been replaced by a 'constraining dissensus' (Hooghe and Marks 2005). On the other hand, however, scholars are increasingly aware of the potentially multifaceted nature of public support, or the lack thereof, for the EU (for example, Lubbers and Scheepers 2005). Taggart and Szczerbiak (2004), for example, distinguish between 'hard' and 'soft' versions of Euroscepticism. While the former implies 'outright rejection of the entire project of European political and economic integration, and opposition to one's country joining or remaining a member of the EU', soft Euroscepticism, by contrast, 'involves contingent or qualified opposition to European integration' on the basis of disagreement with specific policies or the protection of national

interests (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2004: 3–4). In a similar vein, de Vries argues that public opinion towards Europe is best described as ambivalent. Indeed, given the complexity of the European project, it is not unlikely that citizens hold conflicting views about the prospects of further integration. And thus it should come as no surprise that even seasoned Europhiles may oppose certain EU policies, or that – to draw on Easton's (1965) classic distinction – citizens may lend diffuse support to the EU but little specific support. Contrasting public opinion in Western with Central and Eastern Europe, de Vries finds that support for European integration on average is higher in the West than in the East, although Western European publics are more ambivalent about the EU than their Central and Eastern counterparts are. As attitude ambivalence increases with the length of membership, she suggests that this East–West discrepancy can be explained at least in part by the fact that the accumulated experience of long-standing EU members in the West has generated more ambiguity about the benefits of membership, while EU membership for the accession countries in the East was by and large positively associated with the strengthening and consolidation of the free market, democracy and the rule of law. The current economic crisis may well make the anticipated financial and political gains of EU membership less likely to crystallize in the East, while in both regions we may expect ambivalence to transform into more clear-cut opposition towards the deepening and widening European integration if the crisis endures.

Nearly 50 years after the foundation of *Government and Opposition*, Ghiţă Ionescu might have been pleased to see that two of his main ideals – unity and peace in Europe, freedom and democracy in Eastern Europe – had by and large been realized. Against the backdrop of this major success story, however, the contributions to this special issue suggest that the old certainties that once characterized politics in the European liberal democracies are gradually eroding, while the volatile and fragmented polities of the new post-communist democracies in the East are only adding to the increased uncertainties. European democracies in the twenty-first century are having to contend with various challenges that are aimed, directly or indirectly, at the core of the political system, including the populist disregard for some of the fundamental values of liberal democracy and the rule of law, the erosion of democratic accountability and legitimacy, and the unclear outcomes of further

European integration. Our set of articles does not capture what may be yet further shifts if the economic stresses prove to be systemic rather than episodic. What they do suggest, however, is that the ongoing financial and economic crises have exacerbated many of the existing tensions and have contributed to a polarization of domestic and supra-national policy issues. Whether the euro crisis will prove to be a temporary glitch or a watershed event in the history of democratic European politics is too early to tell and will require further explorations of social scientists into the undercurrents of political change within and across countries.

NOTE

[1] Perhaps appropriately, both authors of this article found themselves involved in various such projects in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s and 2000s.

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